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ABSTRACT

In countries other than Canada, schools are used to accomplish four goals: manpower development (to develop skills needed to implement national policies); cultural survival (to prevent the loss of indigenous culture or language); social priorities (to accomplish social goals); and political purposes (to disseminate propaganda). In Canada, the school is not expected to fulfill these goals. Instead, there are a number of commonly perceived purposes for education such as providing custodial care, teaching the basics, developing the whole child, solving society's problems, job training, and teaching particular viewpoints. The primary purpose of the schools in Canada should be develop each child's cognitive capabilities. Schools today should not be held accountable for social, artistic, moral, and physical development. In the future, however, as more instruction is done at home by machine, the school will expand its role into that of provider of moral, emotional, and social support and provider of adult and leisure education. (Author/JM)

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# *WHAT ARE SCHOOLS FOR? AN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE*

*by*

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*WHAT ARE SCHOOLS FOR? AN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE*

*Whenever I visit a foreign country, I am stimulated anew to think about the question: What are schools for? We all know what schools are for in Canada -- don't we? Let me briefly mention a few things happening in some other countries -- things that have interested me and that bear on certain purposes for which schools are used in those countries. I shall attempt in each case to relate these purposes to the Canadian situation.*

*Manpower development. In many countries schools are used mainly for "manpower development" purposes. This is the case not only in developing countries like Nigeria and Brazil where (in order to advance economically) human talent must be developed with the particular skills needed to exploit whatever resources the country must rely on for its economic growth, but also in developed countries like Russia and other socialist nations where national development policies (dictated by totalitarian regimes) require that the schools emphasize certain disciplines from time to time in order to ensure an adequate supply of manpower with the particular talents required to implement the national policies.*

*Is this "manpower development" approach an important part of what schools are for in Canada? No. In fact, our lack of any national goals in education caused great surprise and dismay to the international team of experts commissioned by the Paris-based OECD to review educational policy in Canada. We are one of the few countries in the world that does not even have a national Minister or Secretary or Office of Education. Even the United States, whose constitution also effectively delegates responsibility for education to the state level, now has a federal Department and Secretary of Education. (Incidentally, a couple of decades ago the U.S. got into the "manpower development" approach in a fairly big way. When Russia won the*

race to space with its first Sputnik in 1957, much of the American disappointment and frustration was focussed on the schools -- it was claimed to be their fault. So the Americans established ambitious upgrading programs in mathematics, science, and foreign languages as major educational priorities for "manpower development" purposes. And it worked, because only twelve years later the U.S. had developed sufficient talent to beat Russia to the moon. (But did everybody then give the credit for this to the schools? Not at all! NASA got the bouquets.))

Cultural survival. In some countries, schools are used for "cultural survival" purposes. I found this in Malaysia, for example, where there was a tendency toward using English as the main language of instruction in schools (Malaysia is, of course, a member of the Commonwealth). But a massive incursion of Chinese immigrants was gradually establishing Chinese as the main language outside of the schools and there was a perceived danger that the indigenous Malay language (and probably its accompanying culture too) would gradually disappear unless something drastic was done to save it. So the government established a new policy that, henceforth, the main language of instruction in the schools would be Malay rather than English. Ironically, I don't think this has lessened the incidence of Chinese, but it has decreased the facility with English -- which some view as a harmful result.

Is this "cultural survival" an important part of what schools are for in Canada? I don't think so -- with one obvious exception: in Quebec the French-language law, requiring that all children be taught in French (with only a few exceptions), was passed for reasons similar to those underlying the Malaysian decision. But otherwise, "cultural survival" is not a major priority for Canadian education because no one has yet succeeded in identifying a Canadian "culture" worth preserving.

*Social priorities. In some countries, schools are used to achieve "social priorities." An interesting case in point is Singapore, where there was real concern about the island becoming over populated. The usual approaches to mass birth control haven't proved very effective anywhere, as far as I know, so the Singapore government wanted to back them up with sanctions that would be truly meaningful. To do this, they built on the traditional interest in and respect for education that Singaporeans share with several other Asians. They passed a law to the effect that the first two children of any parents would be able to attend the elementary school of their choice (usually the neighbourhood school) free of charge (primary education is not compulsory in Singapore as it is here). Any further children that those parents had would have to have the full tuition paid by the parents for their schooling and, even then, they would have to attend whatever school the government chose to send them to. This seems to be helping to keep the birth rate under control in Singapore.*

*Are schools in Canada used as agents to achieve "social priorities" like this? No -- largely, once again I think, because we do not have major "social priorities" -- except a general "motherhood" one like "equality of educational opportunity" -- which we have not achieved despite free and compulsory education for all. One "social priority" we could have used the schools for is our development as a constitutionally bilingual country. But we didn't do it, for various reasons (partly political), and I am not aware of any other "social priority" that our schools have been used to help achieve.*

*Political purposes. In some countries schools are used for "political purposes." Certainly this was the case in Hitler's Germany. This use is particularly evident at the level of higher education. In Turkey, I saw university campuses "crawling" with fully armed military personnel and I talked with university presidents whose homes had been bombed, families*

*injured, and threatened with worse. My colleague, the only Dean of Education in Turkey, had a daytime body guard and a nighttime body guard, and he slept with a loaded revolver under his pillow. Now this sounds a bit like the Ohio State University I knew ten years ago -- soldiers, tear gas, etc. (or like Sir George Williams College in Montreal). But those North American problems revolved around social issues (civil rights, the Viet Nam War, etc.), not around political partisanship as is the case on Turkish campuses and in some parts of Europe.*

*Another tragic situation is Cyprus which, it is well known, had been shared by Turkish and Greek Cypriots living side-by-side for many years (some of the time as a British protectorate until independance in 1960); but then the attempted coup of the Greek generals against President Mikarios, followed by the Turkish invasion in 1974, broke the country into two bitterly opposed political factions. The Turks have taken over all of Northern Cyprus, and enclaves elsewhere as well. They are emigrating numerous Turks into their parts of Cyprus, presumably to build up their representation on the Island (which stood at 20 per cent at the last count, but there is no way of knowing what it is now because there is virtually no communication between the two sides). This partition has led to some strange and unpleasant situations (told, I presume, from both sides). With specific reference to education, the great bitterness between the two sides is reflected in two separate school systems, each with its own curriculum and administration. Undoubtedly, the bitterness and the one-sided interpretation of circumstances is being passed on to the new generation of both sides. A tragic dimension of this is that, while those doing the teaching can remember from personal experience how Greek and Turk once lived comfortably together as <u>Cypriots</u> (i.e., citizens of the <u>whole</u> Island), the children do not know that it can be so, and I do not believe they are being taught this in the schools. Moreover, since there is no*

university in Cyprus, those who wish to pursue higher education must go to Turkey or Greece (or elsewhere in Europe) depending on which kind of Cypriot they are, and thus the gap is widened even further by education at that level.

Is the educational system of Canada used as a setting for "political" action or proselytizing as in Turkey, Cyprus, and numerous other countries around the world? No, fortunately -- at least not consciously. Circumstances are not as extreme here as in Turkey or Cyprus, which may help to explain why we have been able to keep Politics out of the schools (although there is no question that schools are very political institutions).

If Canadian schools are not used for economic, cultural, social, and political purposes like those in some other countries, then what <u>are</u> our schools for? They have several <u>perceived</u> purposes:

1. For some people, their central purpose is <u>custodial</u> -- that is, keep the kids "off the street" and out of the labour market as long as we justifiably can. For some children this is the only reason for compulsory attendance until age 16; they are not being served with any other purpose.
2. For some people, their central purpose is the "<u>basics</u>" -- make sure that their products can read, write, and cipher even if they learn nothing else.
3. For some people, their central purpose is to develop the "<u>whole child</u>" -- as if that can be done by an agency which has a child for only one-third of his waking hours.
4. For some people, their central purpose is to <u>solve society's problems</u> -- through educating young people so that they will grow up and give us a crime-free, sickness-free, polution-free, energy-rich world. (Good luck!)

5. For some people, their central purpose is job training -- as if that were all there is to education (to human growth and development) and as if it were likely that all young people will get the jobs for which they are trained and will stay with them throughout their working lives (all of which is patently ridiculous).

6. For some people, their central purpose is to teach particular viewpoints or skills that certain interest groups or pressure groups believe all children should be required to master. Thus, the schools are called on, in addition to the more traditional curriculum (which most people want to retain), to teach bilingual education, multicultural education, sex education, consumer education, labour education, environmental education, legal education, outdoor education, global education, physical education, moral education, adult education, religious education, art and music education, career education, technical-vocational education, economic education, drug and alcohol education, health education, driver education, etc., etc., etc. -- in addition to the three R's, social studies, and science. And each of the demanding groups feels that its subject must be compulsory. Unless someone finds a way for schools to enrol our children for 48 hours a day, there is no way in which all of these demands can be met.

The above are just some of the purposes that some people believe our schools should serve. Each of them is ridiculous in its own way. Yet, the schools are roundly criticized for not taking each of these functions as their main purpose. And should the schools stage an unimpressive concert or field a losing team, they get "dumped on" even more.

So what are schools for in Canada? My own view is that the primary purpose of our schools should be to develop each child's cognitive capabilities

*to their fullest potential. By "cognitive," I mean the abilities (largely intellectual, but with some emotional and aesthetic overtones) to think, to imagine, to value, to reason, to understand, and to inquire -- in general, "learning how to learn." This is the one major function that I think our schools are capable of performing -- not only well, but also better than any other agency in our society.*

*But what about such other functions as social development, moral development, artistic development, and physical development?* I would argue that objectives primarily in the affective and psycho-motor domains should be pursued in schools only to the extent that they can demonstrably contribute to the achievement of objectives in the cognitive domain. Thus, for example, physical education should be pursued in schools to the extent that it yields useful knowledge about the human body, nutrition, and other aspects of health -- and to the extent that physical activity demonstrably contributes to the student's ability to develop cognitively; beyond this, engagement in physical activity -- pleasurable and important as it is -- should become the major responsibility of health, sports, and recreation agencies for which such activity is a primary rather than a secondary function. Similarly, art education should be pursued in schools to the extent that it yields useful knowledge about the aesthetic endeavours of mankind, and to the extent that engagement in artistic activities demonstrably improves attitudes conducive to cognitive development; beyond this, the furtherance of artistic talents should become a major responsibility of galleries, workshops,*

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**The comments in this paragraph are drawn from "Our Schools Need Help: Toward an 'Open Sector Adjunct' in Public Education," Education Canada, Vol. 18, No. 2 (Summer, 1978), pp 14-15.*

*libraries, and other agencies for which the arts are primary rather than secondary. And again, moral education should be pursued in schools to the extent that it yields useful knowledge regarding alternative value systems (thus providing an information base on which students can develop understanding of that value system with which they are most comfortable) and to the extent that it contributes to the growth of intellectual skills necessary for cognitive development; beyond this, the pursuit of moralizing for moralizing's sake should be left with the home, the church, and other agencies to which it may more appropriately be assigned as a primary responsibility. We must narrow the focus and purpose of schools to a more realistic level, and broaden our concept of education to incorporate numerous other agencies and objectives. We should not allow schools to be held accountable for education broadly defined. But as educators, school people should play a meaningful leadership role in systematically bringing other agencies into the picture and in supporting them as they take on increased, and acknowledged, responsibilities in "education." The home, the church, the media, business and industry, and a variety of social and cultural agencies contribute to education in many ways and have the potential to contribute much more effectively than they do now. The problem is that they are not at present held accountable for these contributions, nor are their contributions properly coordinated with what takes place in schools.*

*Schools, then, cannot legitimately be held primarily accountable for the social, artistic, moral, and physical development of our young people. It is irrational to blame the schools for not producing 100 per cent law-abiding citizens, or enough concert pianists, or exhibiting painters, or spiritual leaders, or gold-medal-winning athletes. Our schools are not funded, equipped, or staffed to meet these purposes. Their personnel are not properly trained to do all of these things. Those in other societal agencies are, at present,*

*better able to pursue some of these purposes than schools are, and we should not let them "cop out" by blaming the schools when society is not satisfied with the extent to which these purposes are met.*

*The school's main business, then, is cognitive development. There is no question that children continue to grow and develop in every imaginable way at school (as they do at home, on the play ground, or wherever else they may be) and that schools (like families) must be aware of this and must try and contribute constructively to all types of growth and development as opportunities arise -- at least they must try and prevent mis-education in non-cognitive categories of growth and development. But to hold the schools accountable for developing each child to his fullest potential in all areas of growth and development is ridiculous and it is unfair.*

*The above comments, however, apply to schools as we know them now, with all of their limitations of talent and other resources. I have defined what I believe should be our base-line position at the beginning of the 1980's. But what is this decade going to bring in education? Where are we going to be ten years from now? Where do we want to be?*

*We are finally (after 20 years of promising) learning how to apply some of the advanced information-processing and communication technologies in education. And school enrolments have been declining and will continue to decline for the next several years, especially in the rural areas. The implications for schools of these technological and demographic developments include the following:*

1. *Much of the formal didactic instruction that has traditionally taken place in the schools will move, through machines, into our homes (especially in rural areas, but increasingly in the cities too, I suspect) -- or at least into remote learning stations.*

2. *The schools, to remain open and keep their staffs employed, will strive to take on additional roles as teachers become more like facilitators of learning environments and providers of moral, emotional, and social support -- and less mere deliverers of didactic instruction. And school officials, recognizing that the average age in their communities is increasing and that their young students must be educated to make the best possible use of the much greater amount of leisure they will have in their adulthood than we have in ours, will seek new levels of responsibility in providing adult education and education for the constructive use of leisure through literary, cultural, and artistic appreciation, sports and games, global and language education for travel purposes, and the like -- tasks that (as I have indicated) many schools are not very well equipped to perform at present.*

*So there will be some turning "upside-down" in terms of what our schools are for. By the end of the 1980's they will have divested themselves of some responsibilities for formal education (didactic instruction for cognitive development) which (as I have said) they are currently well qualified for; and they will have taken on some responsibilities for non-formal education currently being done by a variety of other agencies and which many schools (as I have said) are not at present very well qualified for.*

*My main concern, in this regard, is that (<u>before</u> that happens) schools must convince the public and the provincial governments that they <u>were</u> too ambitious in the past, that they are <u>now</u> truly qualified to serve <u>well</u> only <u>one</u> educational purpose (that of cognitive development), and that if they are to meet the emerging needs of the 1980's they must be provided with a major infusion of new resources, new talent, and new training and retraining programs for their staffs. Otherwise, we shall simply have a tragic repeat of what*

*happened in the 1960's, when schools meekly accepted all the expectations that society burdened them with and which they quite naturally fell short of meeting. Schools cannot afford another crisis of credibility like that. Education is too important and too honourable a function for us to allow that to happen to its primary institutional agent and symbol, the school.*

*It is in the best interests of all of us to help our school systems make clear what they can and cannot do well at present, to aid them in specifying what new resources they will require if they are to effectively discharge the new and different responsibility society expects to "unload" on them as the 1980's unfold, and to support them in their appeals for those needed new resources. If we, as the general public, do not provide these kinds of assistance to our schools, we can "kiss them off" as increasingly irrelevant and obsolete institutions for which society no longer has much real use or need. This is happening already in some North American settings, and it would be tragic if it happened in Western Canada because I do not know what we would replace them with.*

*Our schools are worth saving, but we must all become actively involved in the rescue operation.*